

# Oliver Kamm

Politics, economics and culture

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January 23, 2004

## Ideological apology for terror

Having observed a vow of silence concerning the Liberal Democrats for a full week, I'm tempted to point out what happens when that party is free of the restraining influence of my scrutiny. But unfortunately [this](#) is no matter for facetiousness:

A Liberal Democrat MP sparked outrage last night by saying she would consider becoming a suicide bomber if forced to live like Palestinians.

Pro-Israel politicians were incensed by Dr Jenny Tonge's remarks.

But a defiant Dr Tonge, the party's former international development spokeswoman, told a pro-Palestinian lobby that life under Israel could be intolerable.

"That sort of thing repeated on a daily basis made me understand how people can become suicide bombers," she said.

"I think if I had to live in that situation - and I say that advisedly - I might just consider becoming one myself."

Dr Tonge didn't disclose whose advice it was on which she had acted advisedly, but the evidence suggests it was someone concerned to dig a hole still deeper for her:

Dr Tonge issued a further clarification of her remarks through the Lib Dem press office, but they seemed unlikely to satisfy her critics.

The MP said: "I do not condone suicide bombers or terrorism. But I do understand, having been to Palestine myself and having seen the daily barrage of humiliation and aggravation [*sic*] faced by Palestinians, why suicide bombers opt for this most desperate of actions.

Unsurprisingly the political reaction across parties – though not, apparently, including the Liberal Democrats themselves - has been swift and deprecatory. It should be obvious – though I fear that to some of the shriller Liberal Democrats it isn't obvious at all – that Dr Tonge's remarks are incompatible with any reasonable conception of public service in a constitutional democracy, but it's worth spelling out why the empirical claims and the political principles underlying her views are inflammatory nonsense.

First, Dr Tonge's insistence that she "understands ... why suicide bombers opt for this most desperate of actions" is factually wrong. She doesn't understand. She has made no attempt to understand. Instead of so attempting, she has merely retailed an idle stereotype that shifts the moral responsibility for acts of barbarism on to the victims and away from the perpetrators.

What drives and characterises terrorists is a question to which an economist at Princeton University, Alan Krueger, has devoted statistical expertise and dispassionate analysis. Writing in

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Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
				1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31

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the New York Times last year he [noted](#) that Palestinian terrorists do not fit the conventional image of being desperate and impoverished:

The stereotype that terrorists are driven to extremes by economic deprivation may never have held anywhere, least of all in the Middle East. New research by Claude Berrebi, a graduate student at Princeton, has found that 13 percent of Palestinian suicide bombers are from impoverished families, while about a third of the Palestinian population is in poverty. A remarkable 57 percent of suicide bombers have some education beyond high school, compared with just 15 percent of the population of comparable age.

This evidence corroborates findings for other Middle Eastern and Latin American terrorist groups. There should be little doubt that terrorists are drawn from society's elites, not the dispossessed.

With a Czech collaborator, Jitka Maleckova, Professor Krueger published his research findings in detail in a National Bureau of Economic Research working paper in 2002 (available for download [here](#) for a nominal fee). He concluded that there was in fact some positive correlation between privilege and terrorism, and drew a parallel with those who engage in political activity:

More educated people from privileged backgrounds are more likely to participate in politics, probably in part because political involvement requires some minimum level of interest, expertise, commitment to issues and effort, all of which are more likely if people are educated and wealthy enough to concern themselves with more than mere economic subsistence ... Terrorist organizations may prefer highly educated individuals over less educated ones, even for homicide suicide bomb attacks. In addition, educated, middle or upper class individuals are better suited to carry out acts of international terrorism than are impoverished illiterates because the terrorists must fit into a foreign environment to be successful.

It's possible that Dr Tonge has read this research and uncovered flaws in the data and methodology (though it should be noted that Professor Krueger, whose specialist area is the economics of the labour market, is highly familiar with research areas that require analysis of data), and has simply decided to keep her findings secret. It's also possible that she's a silly woman who has no idea what she's talking about. I merely state the possibilities: you decide.

But Dr Tonge's pronouncements are worse than merely ignorant. Her protestation that she does not condone terrorism is a disingenuous and indecent rhetorical trick intended to absolve her of responsibility for doing exactly what she claims she isn't doing. The point about this type of reasoning has been made with pellucid clarity by the political philosopher Michael Walzer, author of one of the most important [books](#) of our age on the ethics of war. Shortly after September 11 he identified the type of moral evasion that Dr Tonge exemplifies, and named it the 'Politics of Ideological Apology'. He [lists and dissects](#) several spurious rationalisations for terrorist acts:

The fourth excuse plays on the notion of innocence. Of course, it is wrong to kill the innocent, but these victims aren't entirely innocent. They are the beneficiaries of oppression; they enjoy its tainted fruits. And so, while their murder isn't justifiable, it is ... understandable. What else could they expect? Well, the children among them, and even the adults, have every right to expect a long life like anyone else who isn't actively engaged in war or enslavement or ethnic cleansing or brutal political repression. This is called noncombatant immunity, the crucial principle not only of war but of any decent politics. Those who give it up for a

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moment of *schadenfreude* are not simply making excuses for terrorism; they have joined the ranks of terror's supporters.

I have no hesitation in declaring the Liberal Democrat MP for Richmond Park an ideological apologist for terrorism. The response of her party so far has been muted or even collaborative. Dr Tonge put out her 'clarification' through the party's Press Office. One very young member of her party even commended her 'honesty' – evidently unaware that honesty is the last characteristic Dr Tonge displays in her moral evasions, and that in any event reticence in proclaiming one's views is much the more honourable course where those views stand outside the bounds of civilised political discourse.

A principled democratic party cannot afford to categorise Dr Tonge's opinions as 'personal views', as if they were merely a legitimate minority opinion within a latitudinarian whole. They are abhorrent, they need to be described as such, and Dr Tonge must be given the choice of retracting her remarks or losing her party's whip. Today.

**UPDATE:** I asked for action today, and she was **sacked** from her party's front bench this afternoon. This is a minimal step. If, as Charles Kennedy declares, Dr Tonge's views are incompatible with Liberal Democrat principles, it raises the question of why she has not also been deprived of the Liberal Democrat whip. Nonetheless, it would be churlish of me to dispute that Dr Tonge's sacking and the speed with which it was accomplished are to Charles Kennedy's credit, and I don't dispute it.

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